

Plans Under Way for Marine Mammal Rescue Facility

By SUSANNA SHEEHAN

On a flood tide in early spring, a pair of harbor porpoises swim into Duxbury Bay and under the Powder Point bridge into the Back River. The high tide deceives the animals, and as it recedes, one of the pair becomes stranded on the marsh. The other swims in a confused pattern, disoriented without its partner.

If luck is with the animals, Harbormaster Don Beers and Assistant Harbormaster Peter Smey will rescue the stranded mammal, picking it up and carrying it back to the ocean. An uninjured porpoise can then join its partner and swim away. But for those who have been hurt or are sick, additional help is needed.

That's when the New England Aquarium's proposed marine mammal rehabilitation facility at Battelle will be a life saver. The new \$300,000 center will be like an emergency room for sick and injured marine mammals such as harbor porpoises and dolphins.

It will have a life support room, a 2,200 gallon salt-water critical care tank and a 29,600 gallon rehabilitation pool, which could hold two dolphins or three harbor porpoises at a time. A marine veterinarian and a staff will be available 24-hours a day to care for the animals as well as perform research into why these animals become stranded and how humans can help minimize the impact of strandings.

This facility, which will open in July, will be the only one of its kind on Massachusetts coast with the exception of the one at the New England Aquarium. However, at that site, space is limited for harbor porpoises and dolphins. Battelle's location, halfway between Cape Cod and Boston, will allow the aquarium staff to respond more quickly to stranding emergencies on the Cape, such as the mass stranding of Atlantic white-sided dolphins in Wellfleet this past March. Now, injured animals are either taken to Boston or to the Baltimore Aquarium.

Both Aquarium representatives and those from Battelle are enthusiastic about the partnership.

"This is another fusion of activities between Battelle and the Aquarium and we're proud of it," said Tony Graffeo, vice president at Battelle and director of the Duxbury laboratory.

"It's a good location," said Jerry Schubel, New England



New England Aquarium President Jerry Schubel was in Duxbury this week to unveil plans for a Marine Mammal facility at Battelle.

Aquarium President and CEO. "We share many interests with Battelle." Battelle in Snug Harbor is an international organization specializing in environmental research and consulting. The relationship between the two organizations goes back about 15 years. Both Graffeo and Schubel attended at a reception for the center at Joan and David Collins's home on Washington St. last week.

"I think it's outstanding," said Harbormaster Don Beers. "It's fabulous they picked Duxbury for a site. It's part of where our whole waterfront is going — teaching people about access and our natural resources with the maritime school. It's a credit to our town's philosophy about what goes on at the shore that they picked us. It's all fitting like a glove."

Beers said the facility will be especially useful when he must call the Aquarium about the porpoise strandings, which have become more frequent over the past few years during the spring.

The New England Aquarium's Marine Animal Rescue Team responds to over 2,000 calls per year and has rescued and rehabilitated more than 500 animals over the past 25 years. These animals include white-sided dolphins, pilot whales, harbor porpoises, seals, and sea turtles. The Battelle facility will be mostly used for harbor porpoises, whose population is in decline as hundreds die each year because of entanglement in gill nets. It may occasionally be used for a mother and calf pair of dolphins. Schubel said the building will increase the number and size of animals the Aquarium can help.

The new rehabilitation center will not be open to the public because the animals are not for show.

However, there are ways for the public and Duxbury residents to become involved. Round-the-clock care is required when an animal is brought in and local volunteers are needed at that time. Also, Schubel said the public could be involved with the release of successfully rehabilitated animals. There may even be the possibility of behind-the-scenes tours by special arrangement.

There are many opportunities to give to the project. For more information, call the Aquarium at (617) 973-6593.